

# The Briefing



*Thank you for printing this page. Do come back to [matthiasmedia.com/briefing](http://matthiasmedia.com/briefing) again, as we are constantly adding new and challenging Christian articles. Please note that, to save you paper and ink, we have stopped navigation, comments and other unnecessary elements from printing.*

## Can you feel it?

Kirsten Birkett (<http://matthiasmedia.com/briefing/authors/kirsten-birkett/>) | 4 June, 1997

Jonathan Edwards is something of a celebrity in theological circles these days. He is revered by American writers as one of their greatest sons. In the controversy over charismatic ‘manifestations’ (such as in the Toronto Blessing), he has often been quoted as a reformed evangelical who was in favour of extraordinary emotional outpourings, and who promoted revival, with all its sometimes unruly accompaniments.

However, even before this recent fame he was considered one of the most influential theologians of early America. As well as being a gifted preacher and pastor, Edwards was a man of enormous intellect and learning. He was a Congregational minister in Massachusetts from 1726, and lived and preached through the First Great Awakening, during which time George Whitefield was evangelizing many of the young colonies of America. His theological understanding provided a solid basis for the radical growth of the church around him, and he addressed many of the issues raised by this great movement of the Spirit.

In 1746, Edwards published one of his most important works. *A Treatise on the Religious Affections* discusses issues of emotion and heart, partly in response to Edwards’s critics who claimed that revival was all emotion and show. He examines what part religious emotion plays in genuine, biblical spirituality.

As emotional beings, we all have a tendency to make mistakes concerning how we ought to regard our emotions. The history of theology shows widely varying views as to how we ought to exercise emotions, from rigid asceticism to wild outpourings. Edwards’s careful and biblical discussion of the matter—though a bit of a struggle to read to the end!—is well worth our effort in understanding, especially in the current climate of controversy over religious experiences.

# Understanding Edwards's questions

First, however, we must be certain that we are talking about the same thing as Edwards. It pays to be careful when reading historical writing (or indeed any writing) not to assume that the author is addressing the problems we want answered. (In fact, it is enlightening in itself to recognize that people of past times may have categorized their thoughts in different ways from us; it makes us check whether our categories really are justified.)

Jonathan Edwards wrote of 'affections', not emotions. It is a word not in common usage these days. What he is writing about is certainly related to our usage of 'emotions'. (We retain some sense of the older word when we say "that was a very affecting speech" or "my heart was deeply affected".) Edwards describes things such as joy, hope, love, hatred, cheerfulness, grief and sorrow as 'affections'. Perhaps another modern equivalent would be 'feelings'.

However in some ways, Edwards is writing of a broader and somewhat different category from our simple word 'emotions'. He includes things which we would not normally refer to as 'emotions'—such as greed and conceit. Edwards also writes of overwhelming and even strange occurrences which we would probably call 'religious experience'. These are such things as extreme floods of joy, such that the person spontaneously breaks out in praise and ecstatic utterances and seems to be experiencing a different level of reality; or having words of Scripture pop into mind unbidden, in a seemingly supernatural manner.

Edwards sees these as all on the one continuum, so he uses the one word for it all. That is, he first makes a fundamental dichotomy between 'understanding' (mind, thinking, rationality) and 'inclination' (heart, feeling, like or dislike). It is the second category he is concerned with, and this is what he sees as a continuum. In every act of will, he says, we either like or dislike something; we are either inclined or disinclined to the thing in view. When these inclinations become stronger, they move us. They are felt by us as motivating forces towards or away from something. 'Like' becomes 'love'; 'dislike' becomes 'hate'; and so on. These are the 'affections'. We would not normally think of 'emotion' as an inclination of the will. Edwards, however, uses 'affection' as something which is fundamentally an act of will; you choose to be for something or against it. Edwards draws a distinction between these 'affections' and 'passion', which he regards as a more sudden feeling that does not seem to be commanded, but just comes. 'Passion' would seem to be more like what we would call 'emotion'.

Overall, Edwards's use of 'affection' often comes closer to our use of 'heart' than our use of 'emotion'. To Edwards, 'affections' are not just come-and-go feelings; they are deep, ongoing determinations of the heart, which we indeed feel but are much more serious than everyday ups and downs. We usually think of emotions more narrowly as the frothy, extra bit that happens to you, that is more a matter of personality than choice. When we speak of people who are 'emotional', we usually mean they are excitable and easily show outward signs of emotion. Perhaps this discussion indicates for us that our vocabulary is inadequate; we do not really have a word which expresses the deeper, more serious emotions without the connotations of flightiness or outward show. In this article, the word 'emotion' is generally used in the more serious sense, not just meaning 'excitability'.

Edwards, then, addresses a range of things that we would probably divide into different categories; but as long as we keep that in mind, we can follow his arguments. In fact, we find that along the way, Edwards addresses some questions that are very pertinent to today. His main concern was: What are the true distinguishing marks of a saved person? In his time, the church had seen considerable revival, with many converted, accompanied by great emotion. As this happened, it appears that people began to place too much emphasis on emotions and emotional outpourings, and began to consider anyone truly saved and holy who could report great internal spiritual experiences. Following that, there had been a reaction in which many were suspicious of any sign of emotion at all, and considered the true Christian should avoid such undignified behaviour. Edwards, then, was exploring this topic of what part internal experience plays in the life of a Christian.

## Christianity should be heart-felt

First, Edwards makes clear that whatever else true Christian religion is, it must include the heart. “That religion which God requires, and will accept, does not consist in weak, dull and lifeless wishes, raising us but a little above a state of indifference. God, in his word, greatly insists upon it, that we be in good earnest, fervent in spirit, and our hearts vigorously engaged in religion.” The things of religion are so great it would be altogether inappropriate for us not to be strongly affected in heart by them. In response to the gospel, we should not merely express a mild preference for God, or give intellectual assent to the truth of God—we should love God with all our heart. What is more, the mature Christian who has trained his heart in godliness does indeed increase in this kind of emotional response to the things of God.

Indeed, says Edwards, our natures are so constructed that it would be impossible for us to be otherwise. God has created us with hearts as well as minds, and generally our feelings of heart are what impel us to act. Without feelings, our thoughts are left without motivating force—it is a very rare person who truly acts on rational thoughts alone. So it is in religion: “he that has doctrinal knowledge and speculation only, without affection, never is engaged in the business of religion”.

Scripture, writes Edwards, describes religion in terms of the heart. The characteristics of the truly religious are that they tremble at God’s word, they fear him, and they are afraid of his judgements. The godly have a great hope, and a deep love for God as well as hatred for sin. They feel gratitude to God, and compassion for others. The list could go on; the point is, the Bible very frequently speaks of the person of God as one who has deep feelings for the things of God.

Being a Christian, then, is a fervent and heart-felt matter. It is right that our prayers, singing, use of the sacraments and preaching touch our hearts as well as our understanding. In fact, Edwards writes, it is not good enough for us to merely “have good commentaries and expositions on the Scripture and other good books of divinity” for although they may give good doctrinal understanding, “yet they have not an equal tendency to impress them on men’s hearts and affections”. It is good and right that preachers should promote love and joy in the hearers, and preach in such a way as

to arouse a heart-felt 'emotional' response. In conclusion, "No light in the understanding is good, which does not produce holy affection in the heart; no habit of principle in the heart is good, which has no such exercise; and no external fruit is good, which does not proceed from such exercises".

## But are our emotions right?

Edwards had answered one side of the problem. According to his argument, those who claimed that emotions were not a part of true Christianity and were to be avoided at all costs, were wrong. In fact, he had gone so far as to say that without a deep involvement of the heart, one is not being a genuine Christian. Edwards was quite aware, however, of the opposing problem: those who accepted any great inner feeling, and especially fervent expression of that feeling, as being from God, and as being a sign of the true Christian. Heartfelt emotions are good, but how does one know if some particular feeling or emotional experience is a good one?

People frequently assume that if something is extreme, or unusual, or in some other way remarkable, it must be from God. This is the mistaken tendency that Edwards had encountered in his church. Thus, in twelve points he makes clear that there are certain characteristics of religious feeling that, although they may be surprising, are no indication one way or the other that the emotion springs from true religion. In other words, emotions are important in spiritual life, but not always good indicators of our spiritual state. The twelve points are as follows.

1. It is no sign one way or the other that the religious emotions are very high or intense. It is certainly no reason to condemn a person that they have high emotions, for so do the apostles and angels; but on the other hand, it is possible to have high feelings about religious things and yet be quite wrong. For instance, the Israelites had praised God greatly after the rescue from the Red Sea, but soon forgot him.
2. It is no sign that the emotion has an effect on the body. This may seem a strange one for us, and Edwards does not specify precisely what effects he is talking about, though later he mentions trembling, groaning, being sick, crying out, panting and fainting. He makes the point that physical effects can arise from purely natural agitation, so are not evidence of true religion; on the other hand, sometimes such things happen in Scripture as a result of divine visions and experiences, so they should not be taken as marks of Satan either.
3. It is no sign that the person is caused to be fluent and fervent in talking of religious things. Some were inclined in Edward's day to condemn those who talked frequently of God as ostentatious hypocrites; others praised them as showing the signs of a new creature. Either way, Edwards said, Scripture does not give us a rule to judge by. It may well be that the person has been genuinely converted and is overflowing with thankfulness; but people can get excited about all sorts of things, and it may just be a passing phase.

**4.** It is no sign that the person did not excite the emotion by their own endeavours. It is still the case today that people claim to have had a supernatural experience, on the basis that this experience had no other apparent cause that they could account for. Well, says Edwards, the Spirit is supernatural, so he may do supernatural things, and it is foolish to dismiss a person's report of an inner experience as a delusion. Nevertheless, the fact of the experience being seemingly uncaused is no grounds on its own for concluding that it is spiritual. It could be from the devil; or it could just be a natural, involuntary impression like a dream.

**5.** It is no sign that the experience arises from a text of Scripture coming to mind in a remarkable manner. It is quite possible to have a sudden insight into Scripture and to feel gladdened and warmed by it. But to be impressed simply because the insight was sudden is rather strange. It is the content of the Scripture or the insight that matters, not the manner of its arising. All sorts of things can spring to the mind suddenly, and that they are sudden is no indication that they are right. The devil might bring texts of Scripture to mind and misapply them to deceive people.

**6-8.** The next three points are along the same lines. It is no evidence that there is an appearance of love in the experience; or that the person has a great many godly feelings; or that the person has the feelings in a certain order. To all these, Edwards replies that Scripture gives many examples of people who seem to have felt a great many high and fervent feelings, praising God, but were not saved. For instance, the crowds who followed Jesus as he came into Jerusalem were extreme in their praises of God, and presumably felt high feelings at the time; but they disappeared at his crucifixion. That was the real test, not the religious feelings that came so easily.

**9-11.** It is no evidence that the person is disposed to spend a great deal of time in the external duties of religion, or that they greatly praise God, or that they are exceedingly confident. Again, people can be very religious without being saved.

**12.** Nothing can be concluded concerning religious experience that the person greatly moves others when talking about it. It had been argued that if the person in describing their experience or their feelings towards God could affect others, then it must be a work of the Spirit in them. Not so; the hearer may be genuinely moved by someone else's account of God's grace, regardless of whether the speaker had a genuine religious experience or not. In fact, if the hearer is truly godly, then of course he or she will be moved by fervent talk of the goodness of God. That tells us very little about the spiritual state of the speaker.

In other words, feelings, important as they are, prove little. It is very easy to be deceived. A strong feeling—even an overwhelming, inexplicable experience—could be from the devil, or could be caused by some other thing, quite apart from being a genuine response to the saving grace of God. This leaves us on a rather puzzled note. Edwards, who was so insistent that the godly Christian will be deeply heartmoved, leaves us with no test to tell whether our emotions are ever appropriate.

That is because we—like Edward's critics—have been approaching the question in the wrong way.

## So what are truly holy emotions?

The third and longest section of the treatise is about truly holy emotions, and what their distinguishing signs are. There will not be space to deal with all of Edwards's comments here. (For example, Edwards gives some helpful insights into how 'holy affections' always issue in Christian practice—we will have to leave this material to a future article.) Here we will merely consider his first point, which he expounds at some length. What is a true godly or spiritual emotion like? Truly spiritual emotions, says Edwards, are those which arise from the Spirit.

At this point the reader is tempted to be a bit frustrated. Edward's answer sounds rather circular to us. We want to know how to tell if a feeling is a spiritual one, and he tells us it is spiritual if it is spiritual. However, his answer tells us that we are asking the wrong question. The really important question is whether the person is saved or not—and the answer to that lies in the work of the Spirit, not in what they are feeling.

As Edwards goes on to discuss the other characteristics of truly godly emotions, they are all really characteristics of the sanctified soul—things like a focus on the excellence of divine things rather than selfinterest, and a love of holiness. For in the end, that is how we know if our emotions are appropriate and a right response to God, or if what we are feeling is truly godly and not just manufactured by imagination or suggestion—it is by being Christian.

It follows that the way to ensure our emotions are godly is not to concentrate on our emotions at all, but to think about God and his gospel. It is as we come to understand and know God better that our emotions will come to have the right focus. Real religious feelings are those accompanied by humility and a changed heart—things which come with the normal Christian endeavour to emulate Christ in prayerful obedience to God. In summary, true godly affection is that felt by the saved person, and it is the work of the Spirit to make it possible.

## What we can learn from Edwards

It is warming to read Edwards, and feel his own passion for God and love of holiness. He tells us that being a Christian is not a cold, harsh matter of doctrine. It is a growing experience of loving God, and learning to love what he loves. We do not need to squash our feelings in church; we need to grow them, in accordance with God's will and his glorious grace. Edwards encourages us to experience God's goodness, to love it, to rejoice in it, not just to understand it intellectually. We will also feel sorrow and grief as God opens our eyes to the horror of sinfulness, and the miserable state of the world, and our own deep sinfulness before him. We will then appreciate all the more fully how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ.

The sad thing is that modern readers may feel that their questions are still unanswered. For we often do not feel this depth of love and joy in Christ. If religious feelings, though not definite signs of salvation, are still part of being

Christian, what do I do if I don't feel them? What if I don't feel joyful at church, or if ministry gets to feel burdensome, or if I'm often feeling low and not experiencing the love of God? Is that a sin?

Reading Edwards tells us that this might be a modern concern rather than a universal one (since he does not address it) but there may be some wisdom we can gain from him. That is, Edwards has demonstrated from the Bible that right emotions are indeed part of right religion. Of course we live in a fallen world and we are sinful, so we will frequently fall short of right behaviour (and Edwards acknowledges this), but Edwards challenges us that we cannot simply divorce our emotional life from the rest of our life.

Perhaps in our efforts to reassure people that they are saved regardless of what they feel, we go too far (as some of Edwards's reactionaries did—for a different reason), and forget that emotions are part of us as whole people. Just as our thoughts and our actions need to be brought in line with Christ's as we are renewed by the Holy Spirit, so do our emotions. There are appropriate feelings when we hear the gospel and what God has done for us. We should respond with all our heart! As we grow in depth of understanding of these things, so we also should grow in the depth of our feeling for them. We should also come to see that our feelings should not be focused on selfish things, but on the things of God.

We can also be encouraged that there is nothing wrong with feeling emotions, even strong, overwhelming ones. They can be inappropriate or misleading, and so as we train our hearts and minds in God's word we will from time to time have to take stock of our emotional trends; but there is nothing wrong with being a feeling person. Part of our problem is that we expend our emotions and feelings on passing, selfish things rather than godly, eternal things. We can look to Christ and his apostles as examples of people of real, godly emotion. Their emotions were deeply engaged with and focused upon the work of God.

The people of God love what God loves, and hate what God hates. In that lies true Christianity.